
*Quest for Place through the Reconstruction of History,
Cultural and Ethnic Belonging in Sally Morgan 's MY
PLACE : A Postcolonial Study*

Subhankar Ghosh

B.A (English), M.A (English), Net

Guest Lecturer At The Department Of English, Shantipur College, West Bengal.

Introduction

The spelling of the term 'post colonialism' has become polemical for their arise a lot of controversies among critics regarding the spelling of this particular term. If this term is spelt with the hyphen, it denotes a particular historical period, like those suggested by phrases like 'after colonialism', 'after independence', or 'after the end of Empire'. This term will be spelt as post colonialism' to denote the various cultural effects of colonization from the beginning of colonial contact (McLeod 5). It will be suitable to explore the successive ways in which the colonial masters have denied subjectivity of the colonized people and dislocated/displaced the colonized people and annihilated historical, cultural and ethnic belonging both literally metaphorically through the imposition of the culture of the colonial masters and linguistic colonization. In the colonial discourse the colonized people have been denied their subjectivity: "... the Orient was not (and is not) a free subject of thought or action." (Ashcroft, *Post-colonial*, 25). The colonized people have been projected objectively. They have not been given language to express themselves. Through annihilation of history, cultural, and ethnic belonging the

colonial masters have annihilated the place of the colonized people, the most important concepts related to the concept of place. The sense of place plays a vital role in the construction of identity and it gives the formerly colonized people their sense of belonging: "How deprived we would have been if we had been willing to let things stay as they were. We would have survived, but not as a whole people. We would never have known our place". (Morgan 235). This idea of place and displacement is one of the major features of postcolonial literatures: "It is here that the special postcolonial crisis of identity comes into being; the concern with the development or recovery of an effective identifying relationship between self and place." (Ashcroft, *Empire*, 8). An important concept related to the concept of place is situation of the indigenous culture, one of the key concepts for the construction of place. They are both literally and metaphorically displaced from their place for, in the one hand, they have been forcibly moved away from their territory and on the other hand, they have been displaced from their history, cultural, and ethnic belonging. This theme of displacement characterises Sally Morgan's *My Place*. The characters in this novel have experienced this kind of

displacement; they have lost their place and become an object of “cultural denigration” (Ashcroft, *Empire* 9). In *My Place* there is a quest for identity and subjectivity. At an age of fifteen, when she becomes aware of Aboriginal heritage, she makes a quest to discover her cultural and ethnic belonging, a journey that ultimately leads her to her own-folk, and her own community and ultimately achieves her goal. Moreover, she makes a documentary of Aboriginal culture, history and ethnicity by recording the life history of herself along with Gladys, her mother, and Daisy, her grandmother, and Arthur, Daisy’s brother and finally rebuilds her identity, her place. In *My Place* many aspects are related to the concept of place such as displacement, history, cultural and ethnic belonging. The purpose of this dissertation is to explore the postcolonial concept of place through the reconstruction of history, culture, and ethnicity annihilated by colonial masters in the colonial design. The concept of displacement/dislocation will also be taken under consideration. The aim is to show how through this construction of place in relation to those concepts, Sally begins her quest to discover her place through the reconstruction of history, cultural, and ethnic belonging. Postcolonial criticism will be the theoretical approach of my analysis. The main postcolonial concept which will be focused in this dissertation for analysis, is the concept of place in relation to the concept of history, culture, and ethnicity. Place is an extension of one’s own being, it is the idea of not owning the land, but in some sense being owned by it. The concept of displacement will be considered both

literally and metaphorically. The process of displacement of the colonized people both literally and metaphorically have been executed in several ways: A valid and active sense of self may have been eroded by dislocation, resulting from migration, the experience of enslavement, transportation, or ‘voluntary removal for indentured labour. Or it may have been destroyed by cultural denigration, the conscious and unconscious oppression of the indigenous personality and culture by a supposedly superior racial or cultural model (Ashcroft, *Empire* 9). The concept of history is vital for the construction of place for “history and legitimation go hand in hand; history legitimates ‘us’ and no others.” (Ashcroft, *Postcolonial*, 317). The concept of ethnicity refers to the sharing of common values, beliefs, rituals festivals, tastes, behaviours, expression, memories, and loyalties, that is, the sharing of common cultural identity. The entire ethnic identity remains alive in the metaphysical level of the people. It remains alive beyond cultural assimilation into the wider society, many times very few features of traditional culture are needed for ethnic identity. My analysis will endeavour to show how Sally Morgan along with her mother, grandmother, and her mother’s uncle, the representative of the colonized, displaced people, become displaced followed by Sally’s quest to discover her root through the discovery of her Aboriginal history. Then, this dissertation will deal with Sally’s endeavour to discover their cultural, and ethnic belonging by visiting Corunna

Downs, the place of origin of the community she belongs to. This analysis will come to an end with Sally's fulfilment of her quest when she attained her true place in the world with her own folk. Construction of Displacement in the Colonial Design through the Annihilation of the Colonized People's History, culture and ethnicity in the colonial-design the colonized people have been projected as barbaric, savage, uncivilized, child, devoid of any trace of enlightenment and civilisation and lives in darkness devoid of light. This kind of negative projection of the colonized people have been validated through the various writings such as *Heart of Darkness* by Joseph Conrad, *Mister Johnson* by Joyce Carry, *The Philosophy of History* by Hegel where he gives us a classic statement of this Eurocentric Prejudice, "pronouncing: 'We [Europeans] must lay aside all thought of reverence and morality ---- all that we call feeling--- if we would rightly comprehend [the African]; there is nothing harmonious with humanity to be found in [the African] character'" (Koran 93). Edward Said in *Orientalism* argues that as the Westerners, who projected themselves as "we", has the power to know the 'Orient', the orient is made into the culturally inferior "they" and this power enables westerners to put "the Westerner in a whole series of possible relationships with the Orient without ever losing him the relative upper hand." (Ashcroft, Postcolonial, 26). The colonial masters cleverly comprehended that to perpetuate their oppressive colonial regime they need to, most crucially and successively, annihilate the history, culture

and ethnicity of the colonized people. The colonial masters begin to initiate the colonisation of the religion, educational system through the foundation of schools and native culture, including dancing, singing, folk-lore's of the colonized countries and most importantly the language, the "carrier of culture" (Ngugi 13) : The physical violence of the battlefield was followed by psychological violence of the classroom. But where the former was visibly brutal, the later was visibly gentle, a process best described in Cheikh Hamidou Kane's novel *Ambiguous Adventure* where he talks of the methods of the colonial phase of imperialism as consisting of knowing how to kill with efficiency and to heal with the same art....their real power resided not at all in the canons of the first morning but in what followed the cannons. Therefore, behind the cannons was the new school. (Ngugi 9). The colonised countries especially West-African countries and Australia didn't have any written history, cultural, and ethnic belonging. They didn't have written literature. They had oral culture which passed from one generation to another orally, that is, through story-telling, celebration of festivals through folk-singing, and folk-dancing, and so on. This orality provided the colonial masters golden opportunity to annihilate native history, culture, and ethnicity and they did so through linguistic colonisation and cultural imposition. How effective this cultural imposition was, has been aptly depicted by Ngugi: The effect of a cultural

bomb is to annihilate a people's belief in their names, languages, in their environment, in their heritage of struggle, in their unity, in their capacities and ultimately in themselves. It makes them see their past as one wasteland. It makes them want to identify ...with other people's languages rather than their own." (Ngugi, 3). In the school master's language replaced the colonized people's languages as a medium of formal education and in the school, orature (oral literature) was replaced by the literature of the maser. As a result, the colonized children were getting familiar to the history, religion, folk-tradition of their master. Thus " language and literature were taking us further and further from ourselves to other selves, from our world to other worlds." (Ngugi 12). Language is the carrier of culture. In doing similar kinds of things and actions over and over under similar circumstances and mutability, knowledge emerge which is handed over to the next generation and become the inherited basis for their further actions on nature and on themselves. There is a gradual accumulation of values which in time become almost self-evident truths governing their conception of what is right and wrong, good and bad, beautiful and ugly, generous and mean in their internal and external relations and developed a distinguished way of life from other way of life and developed distinctive culture and history, ethical and aesthetic values through which they view themselves and their place in the universe. Values are the basis of a people's identity, their sense of particularity as members of the human race: " All this

[history, culture, and ethnicity] is carried by language. Language as culture is the collective memory bank of a people's experience in history. Culture is almost indistinguishable froth the language that makes possible its transmission from one generation to the next. " (Ngugi 15). Language is the carrier of the native history, culture, and ethnicity which constructed native people's sense of identity and the sense of place. The colonial masters imposed their language and successively annihilated the colonized people's history, cultural, and ethnic belonging through linguistic and cultural imposition.

2. Sense of Displacement in Sally Morgan's *My Place*

As it has been proposed earlier that to construct the concept of place the concept of displacement / dislocation will be taken under consideration. In order to build up the concept of place, the concept of displacement is essential for this concept of displacement denotes the fact of being out of place; it denotes the fact of living in alien places. The displacement can be executed both literally and metaphorically. Literal displacement denotes the fact of being displaced from one's own family and from the place of one's origin. On the other hand, metaphorical displacement denotes the fact of being displaced from one's own history, cultural, and ethnic belonging. In *My Place* this both kind of displacement are present. Like many other half-caste children, Sally's grandmother, Daisy and Daisy's brother, Arthur were displaced from their Aboriginal family and their place of origin, Corunna

Downs Station. Arthur ‘...heard they were after me, I ran away. I did not want to be educated... They caught me in the end, put me with Albert and Mrs. McGregor. ‘ (Morgan 176). Arthur feels displacement. He ‘... ‘D like to go back to Corunna Downs....Aah, I always wish I’d never left there. It was my home. ‘ (Morgan 179). The same kind of experience has been shared by her grandmother, Daisy. Daisy ‘ must have been ‘bout fourteen or fifteen when they took me from Corunna.’ (Morgan 331). But what is more important regarding the concept of displacement is the metaphorical displacement. For it is through this kind of displacement, the colonial masters annihilate the native history, culture, and ethnicity. The colonized people are the object of the ‘cultural denigration’ (Ashcroft, Empire 9). In the previous section it has been explored that it is the language which carries the concept of history, culture, and ethnicity. In *My Place*, there is the reference to the linguistic colonisation and cultural imposition when Arthur says , ‘...they started educating’ him[Albert] early....He had to speak English and learn the white man’s ways and table manners...She also gave us what you call religious instruction. We learnt all about saints....I wasn’t allowed to talk black fella....If I did, Dudley beat me. I liked my language, but ...I had to talk English. ‘ (Morgan 176). This quotation substantiates Ngugi was Thiong’o’s argument when Ngugi says, ‘ The language of my education was no longer the language of my culture...English became the language of my formal education... become more than a language.....one of the most

humiliating experience was to be caught speaking Gikuyu in the vicinity of the school. The culprit was given, corporeal punishment....’ (Ngugi 11). In *My Place*, Gladys is the most evident instance of both kind of displacement or ‘cultural denigration’ for in the one hand, she was forcibly moved away from her Aboriginal family and brought to the Parkerville children’s home. On the other hand, she became displaced metaphorically, too, for the master’s language was imposed on her as a medium of formal education. As a result, she was getting more and more familiar to the history, culture, and ethnicity of the master through the imposition of master’s literature in the school. She didn’t get to know the orature or Aboriginal history, culture, and ethnicity. She says, ‘I have no memory’ (239). But everyone was not lucky enough like Arthur who escaped from that kind of imperial system. They led their whole life under that system and became familiar to ‘all about saints’ (Morgan 176), not with their own folk-lores, folk-story, religion, that is, their own culture and eventually were moving further and further from ‘ourselves to other selves, from our world to other worlds.’ (Ngugi 12). Thus, this kind of people remained displaced, they lived in alien place for they neither have awareness of their native history, culture, and ethnic identity for moving from ‘our world to other worlds’ and also, in some cases, not being provided their own culture and history by their family as happened in case of Sally, nor they are given their place in the colonial master’s society. It has been clearly shown when ‘

the kids at school had also begun asking us what country we come from. This puzzled me because, up until then, I'd thought we were the same as them. We insisted that we came from Australia, they'd reply, 'Yeah, but what about your parents but they didn't come from Australia.'" (Morgan 39). Even one of her friend's father told her, "I want to ask a favour of you....I'd like you to stop mixing with Mary....You're a bad influence....I don't want her mixing with you in case she picks up any of your bad habits.'" (Morgan 104).

3. Sally Reconstructs the History and Finds out Her Roots

Legitimation of one's existence and place gets determined by history. As elaborated in the previous section that Sally has been displaced both by the white society and by her family for her mother and grandmother have denied and kept hidden their Aboriginal history, cultural, and ethnic belonging. When she grows up she becomes conscious of the fact that something about her family is unusual and particularly when one of her classmates informs her, "you've got the most abnormally I've ever come across.....the way you all look at life is weird.'" (Morgan 105). Sally was facing identity crisis and to legitimate her existence she needed history of her Aboriginal ancestry for "history and legitimation go hand in hand;" (Ashcroft, Postcolonial, 317). She builds up her historical belonging by visiting the Battey Library, Alice and Judy, the stepmother and half-sister of Sally respectively. Arthur, uncle of Gladys, played the most crucial role in the

reconstruction of history for it is through Arthur's revelation of his life history, Sally got the sense of her own Aboriginal history. Sally exposes to Arthur how the native history is getting annihilated even in the contemporary period by saying "There is lot of our history we can't get at, Arthur. There are all sorts of files about Aboriginals that go way back and the Government won't release them.'" (Morgan 161). Thus, through the various kind of exploration Sally constructs the Aboriginal history and in a way placing this history with in Australian history.

4. Reconstruction of Cultural and Ethnic Belonging in My Place

In order to attain the sense of place, one needs cultural and ethnic belonging for it's the annihilation of colonized people's culture and ethnicity, as described earlier, the imperial power displaced their subjects through imposition of linguistic colonisation and cultural imposition. Cultural and ethnic belonging are indispensable for the sake of construction of place and subjectivity as Ngugi argues, "...culture carries, particularly through orature and literature; the entire body of values by which we come to perceive ourselves and our place in the world" (Ngugi 16).

The language carries culture and to deny language is to deny one's culture. Sally was denied this language by her mother and grandmother and in a way denied cultural belonging: "any of you fellas speak the language? "No", I replied, 'but Arthur could and Daisy can. They won't teach us.'" (Morgan 219) By

visiting her own community, her own folk in North, she comes into the contact with language of her own community when one old man says, "I speak four languages. Light and heavy Nami, Balgoo and Nungamarda and Nybali. Your mother's language would be Balgoo..." (Morgan 222).

Sally makes her quest to discover her cultural and ethnic belonging by visiting the Place of origin of their community. She visits her own folk in the North where people of her community greets her by saying "you are my people", and, "this is your place, too". (Morgan 234). Visiting in the north Sally attains many aspects of ethnic belonging. Wherever they visit, they get the trace of their ethnic belonging, the trace of their own community and family to follow. Each person she comes into contact with, becomes her relative and this gives her sense of ethnic belonging and it becomes clear when another man says "Your mob's from Corunna. You'd be related to most of the people around here, one way or another." (Morgan 220). These encounters accelerate her sense of cultural and ethnic belonging.

5. Fulfilment of Her Quest

Sally, ultimately, fulfils her quest and constructs her place through the reconstruction of history, cultural and ethnic belonging. Initially, her thinking was "What people are we" and at the end she found her place among her own-folks. Now she has a history which legitimates her place, a cultural and ethnic belonging. Through the reconstruction of these concepts she has formed her subjectivity, her identity, her

place which gets substantiated when she says "We'd seen so much of her and ourselves in the people we'd met. We belonged, now" and "We were different people, now." (Morgan 234).

6. Conclusion

Predominantly, in this dissertation, it has been tried to base the analysis on the postcolonial concept of place in relation to the concepts of displacement / dislocation, history, cultural and ethnic belonging. It has been tried to show how Sally, the representative of formerly colonized people, constructed her place through the reconstruction of history, cultural, and ethnic belonging. In *My Place*, Sally through recording and scripting the life history of her family members and visiting Corunna Downs, the place of origin of their community, reconstructed history, cultural and ethnic belonging which constructed her place. When Sally reconstructs the history, she is actually reconstructing the postcolonial history which legitimates the existence of the postcolonial people and legitimates their subjectivity. In this dissertation the postcolonial concept of place through the construction of Identity has been explored and it is being expected that this dissertation will make a lot of other people interested in this particular concept and in future they, by working on the same concept, will enrich this particular postcolonial concept.

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